

Steve Wiggins of the Future Agricultures Consortium provides a rebuttal to Dercon and el Beyrouty's essay: "The Role of Agriculture in Growth Revisited for Africa"

Stefan Dercon and Kareen el Beyrouty's essay published by the International Growth Centre entitled "[The Role of Agriculture in Growth Revisited for Africa](#)" argues that investments in African agriculture do not contribute to Africa's economic growth. While we value discussion and debate on this point, their essay is an exaggeration of the role and value of smallholder agriculture in Africa.

Dercon and el Beyrouty suggest that many argue for agricultural development programmes to supplant other development efforts – but surely different sector policies and investments can work together? Indeed, very little of what is invested in agriculture (e.g. rural roads, education, health, etc.) does not also serve other sectors (the exception is agricultural research and given its very high pay-offs, research is a very sensible investment).

This essay also suggests that high growth linkages *only* exist in agriculture; this is a specious argument made without citation and misrepresents our position for a level playing field and against special treatment or protection. Our argument against an urban bias is not political nor is it economically irrational. We do not argue for agriculture as a driver of development in all situations and at all times but when other sectors have bleak prospects, it is sensible to begin with investments in food security and agriculture.

Naturally, most of us hope that the prospects for other sectors improve, since it is hard to imagine a thriving agriculture without an associated urban economy of services and manufacturing. New Zealand stands out as the exemplar of an economy where agriculture drives and provides most foreign exchange earnings, yet farming generates only 10% of GDP and just 6% of the labour force work on the land implying that average labour productivity is higher on farms than off.

We do, however, have a weak flank, marked by protectionism and subsidies. Dercon and el Beyrouty have a point if they represent the agriculture-first strategy as including heavy farm subsidies and protection through high tariffs on imported farm produce. When India, for example, spends more on subsidies for rural electricity, irrigation water and fertiliser than it does on education, their critique is valid – but few of us recommend this approach for low income countries, especially in Africa.

Finally, we question the way that the Kagera study¹ is interpreted. Few of us believe that migration out of farming / the village is necessarily bad. Indeed, we know very well from many migration studies that outmigration can bring benefits to villages. But migration is far more likely to be undertaken as opportunity rather than desperation, with agricultural development freeing up labour for migration and having fewer drawbacks to the rural community.

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¹ Beegle, K., De Weerd, J. and Dercon, S. 2008. "[Migration and Economic Mobility in Tanzania: Evidence from a Tracking Survey](#)". Policy Research Working Paper, WPS 4798, World Bank, Washington DC.